

A Prophet Named Agabus

A prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" -Acts 21:10-11

God is a God of pictures. God communicates not just in words for the ears but in illustrations for the eyes. The wonders of nature were designed to teach us vivid lessons about life. The stories and patterns of the Old Testament were but types and shadows given by God pointing to the reality of Christ. Jesus painted many word pictures so that we could understand what he was saying by seeing it. When God wants to communicate, more often than not, he gives us a picture.

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Such was the case when the prophet Agabus came to the apostle Paul to give him a message. Like the prophets of old, God gave him an inspired flair for the dramatic. He could have merely told Paul that he would be arrested in Jerusalem, but, as the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Agabus, under inspiration of the Spirit, gave a depiction that would not soon be forgotten. Imagine the interest and attention that were generated when Agabus comes over to Paul and takes his belt. With every eye watching he ties his own hands and feet with it and is ready to deliver the message. Now the words take on an enlivened meaning: *"The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" Paul would never see that belt the same again.*

Prophetic pictures are powerful illustrations that often, as in the case with Paul and Agabus, help to prepare for what is ahead. A few years ago a prophet was ministering in our church and publicly used the illustration of a catapult to predict that we would be removed from our denomination. Not long after, someone else privately gave us the same message using the same word picture. Though it was not our express choice to leave (hence the term "catapult"), when the prophecies were fulfilled, we and our people were better prepared because of the forewarning.

The question for us is not whether God still communicates in prophetic pictures today, but 1) Will we be in a place of humility and hunger to receive such a message? 2) Will we discern and test both the message and the messenger? And, 3) Will we respond to the word of the Lord in obedience and worship?

You Yourself Are Living in Obedience to the Law

There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. - Acts 21:23-24

Many thousands of Jews who were still zealous for the law had come to believe in Jesus (v20). When Paul arrived in Jerusalem from his apostolic activity in the province of Asia, his reputation preceded him—not all of it true or favorable. It was said that Paul was teaching the Jews who lived among the Gentiles to *turn away from Moses* and not live according to the custom of the Jews (v21). So when James and the elders of the church received Paul into their midst they recommended that Paul show all the Jews that these rumors were unfounded by observing the Nazirite vow according to Numbers 6:2-12. In addition, Paul would pay the temple expenses for four other Christian Jews who were already taking the same vow. In this way, James said, *“Everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.”*

Is it appropriate for Jewish Christians to continue to observe Jewish customs?

So, should Paul have done it? Wasn't this the guy who said, *“Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law”* (Ga 3:25)? Didn't Peter call the law, *“A yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear”* (Ac 15:10)? Was Paul really intent on *living in obedience to the law*?

The first thing to remember when Paul agreed with James that he should submit to the observance of this ancient Hebrew custom is that justification by observance of the law was never the issue. Peter's statement at the council of Jerusalem still stood: *“It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved”* (Ac 15:11). The issue was (and still is) whether it is appropriate for Jewish Christians to continue to observe useful biblical and extra-biblical Jewish customs in order to enhance their worship and strengthen their witness among the Jews. The answer is, “Yes”—though I don't think it's the right fit for Gentile Christians to try to put on the customs of the Jews to augment their spiritual experience.

The second thing to remember was that Paul's philosophy was, *“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law”* (1 Co 9:20). He was not compromising the gospel when he took the vow; he was attempting to witness to it while he was among the Jews.

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob..." -Romans 11:25-26

In what sense will all Israel be saved? There are two particular schools of thought that I have considered, but have rejected. One is that to be a descendant of Abraham, in and of itself, is the singular criterion by which every Jew from every milieu can count on for his or her justification. In other words, you'll be saved because you are a Jew. Although some, even in the body of Christ, give assent to this idea, the last of the great Old Covenant prophets, John the Baptist, discounted this notion by pointing out that children for Abraham could be raised out of mere stones.

In what sense will all Israel be saved?

The other unsatisfactory interpretation regarding the salvation of all of Israel is that Paul would be speaking here only of spiritual Israel, that is, the one new man (see Ephesians 2:15) which is the church. The church is spiritual Israel. This is clear from Romans 9:6 when Paul says "*Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel,*" and in Romans 2:28-29 when he says, "*A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit.*" Despite this truth, the context of Romans 11 shows that Paul is clearly speaking of ethnic Israel when he says, "*All Israel will be saved*"—so there must be another explanation.

To help understand what the Holy Spirit is saying, simply consider what else the context tells us: There is a time, when the full number of non-Jews will have come into the kingdom of God. The hardening that Israel has experienced will pass, their hearts will be ready to receive their Messiah and salvation will come to Israel. This means that we are looking forward to a time when a great revival will sweep the people of Israel into the kingdom of God and they will be grafted back into the tree of redemption that began with their ancestors. At that time, the salvation of the Gentiles will no longer be a stumbling block to the Jews. They will again seek the God of Jacob and receive the revelation of the Messiah en masse. When this starts to happen, look out. The end is truly near.

I Am a Jew

Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic: "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: "I am a Jew..." -Acts 21:40-22:3

As Paul was at the temple, honoring and observing the Jewish tradition of the purification of a Nazirite, some Jews from the province of Asia recognized him. Bedlam ensued as they seized Paul, formed a mob, shut the gates of the temple and began beating the life out of him. Saved by Roman soldiers, it was still chaos as they carried him up some stairs past the violent crowd. The average person would be more than satisfied just to get out of there, but Paul was not your average person. He gained permission from the commander to speak to the crowd.

The gospel never asks you to change your culture

As he began to speak, Paul got their attention by speaking in the language of the Jews: Aramaic, or possibly even Hebrew. The initial thing he said in his defense was, "*I am a Jew.*" Paul was, and forever would be a Jew. Nothing would change that. Much of what he believed had been transformed, but now he knew what it meant to be a Jew in the light of the revelation of the Messiah. As he appealed to his *brothers and fathers*, he appealed first on the basis that he was a Jew.

The gospel never asks you to change your culture. I was worshiping in a Vietnamese church recently and recognized most of the songs as western hymns transcribed to Vietnamese. It wasn't until they sang a tune that was distinctly Vietnamese that I felt that there was any real life in the singing—I even sensed a stronger anointing. The gospel comes best when it is culturally relevant.

The gospel transcends culture while it transforms creed. It is unique in that, unlike most religions, it is not tied to culture. It will translate into any culture. If there is a perception that in order to come to faith in Christ one must change his or her culture, there will be resistance to the gospel. That's why the devil always wants to tie religion with culture and make faith in Christ synonymous with a change in one's culture. Insofar as false deities are culturally rooted, there would need to be a transformation of this aspect of a person's culture, but the social and aesthetic facets of culture need never change when embracing Jesus

Paul appealed to the Jews on the basis that he was a Jew. That did not have to change. The gospel did not change Paul's ethnicity or his cultural heritage. But it sure enough changed the man.

Acts 22:30-23:35

June 4

The Sadducees Say That There Is No Resurrection

A dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) -Acts 23:7-8 [Historical information concerning the Sadducees is taken from the NIV Bible Dictionary.]

The Sadducees were a group of politically-minded liberal theologians. They may not have been as vociferous as the Pharisees, but they certainly were not benign. Jesus warned us to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (see Matthew 6:16).

From Scripture we learn that the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection or life after death (Mt 22:23; Ac 23:8) which partly explains why they were *greatly disturbed* that the apostles were *proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead* (Ac 4:2). They put no stock in a spiritual realm—believing neither in *angels nor spirits* (Ac 23:8). They had membership in the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews, and their members sometimes gained the office of high priest (Ac 23:6; 5:17). They were strong in their opposition to the early church, arresting Peter and John (Ac 5:17) and becoming *furious* at the disciples, wanting *to put them to death* (Ac 5:33).

From ancient history we learn that the Sadducees were the political party of the Jewish aristocratic priesthood. Their political goal was the secularization of society through influence of Greek culture. They were seen by the occupying Roman forces as amiable. The Jewish historian, Josephus, reports that the Sadducees murdered James, the main leader of the church at Jerusalem. Whereas we know that numerous Pharisees and priests came to the Lord, there is not one report in Scripture or antiquity of any Sadducee coming to faith in Christ.

All this does not bode well for the many in our mainline denominations who deny such distinct tenants of the faith as the resurrection, the existence of Satan and the return of Christ and who focus most of their energy on political and social agendas. They are, as were the Sadducees, starkly out of touch with the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God and have little chance of knowing the risen and returning Christ. They preach an impotent gospel that can neither save nor deliver its hearers—which means that they themselves have about as much chance of being saved as the Sadducees.

Acts 24:1-26

June 5

Righteousness, Self-control and the Judgment to Come

There is not one report in Scripture or antiquity of any Sadducee coming to faith in Christ

Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. -Romans 11:20-22

Gentile Christians have always been in danger of becoming conceited about their own relationship to God over and against that of the Jews. You might not think so, but when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, to a large degree, he is addressing the Jews. But in 11:13, he specifically addresses the Gentiles and cautions them against a trap of religious pride, especially in the way that they thought about the Jews.

In the span of 32 verses Paul warns the church five times against becoming proud: In 11:22 he tells them not to be *arrogant* about the fact that the Jews have become broken off branches while they have been grafted in. In 11:25, his desire is they not be ignorant about the Jews so as to prevent them from becoming *conceited*. In 12:3 he tells them to not think of themselves more highly than they ought. And in 12:16 he says: “*Do not be proud*” and, “*Do not be conceited.*”

The antidote for such pride: Fear. Paul tells the Gentiles, “*Do not be arrogant, but be afraid.*” Afraid of what? That they too could be cut off from life in God if they fail to *continue in his kindness*. If God did not spare the natural branches because of their unbelief, they, and we, should not expect God to act any different toward the ones who have been grafted in. If the natural branches were cut off because they failed to produce fruit, then what makes us think that we would be spared if we too should fail to produce the fruit for which God is looking from his people?

The literal meaning of this word “arrogant” is “over minded” or “high minded.” It is thinking too highly of oneself. We walk on thin ice when we start thinking highly of ourselves—especially in relation to others. The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18 is an illustration of this. And we should be especially careful when it comes to lording it over the Jews, because, after all, they were chosen first. They are the natural branches. We have only been grafted in.

The remedy for this high mindedness is the realization that if it weren’t for the grace of God we would not have an inheritance with or as the people of God. To forget this is foolishness and to not to fear the possibility of our own demise is arrogance.

Romans 11:25-36

June 30

All Israel Will be Saved

We should be especially careful when it comes to lording it over the Jews, because, after all, they were chosen first.

But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. - Romans 10:16-17

I've often heard Romans 10:17 given as the prescription for increased faith. It reads something like this: "'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God,' so read the Bible and your faith will increase." I am not about to argue with the premise that reading the Bible will give you more faith; it is a fairly good premise but it is a lousy interpretation of what Paul is saying here.

Looking at the context (this is the first rule of Bible interpretation), you will find that Paul is not talking here about reading the Bible—nor is he talking about increasing one's faith. He is talking about how people come to faith in Christ in the first place. He is talking about people getting saved. He says, "*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'*" (vs 14-15). Paul then goes on to say that not all the Israelites accepted this good news—fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: *Lord, who has believed our message?* Consequently, faith comes by hearing the message of the good news. Simple, logical and understandable.

The fact that the same Greek word can be translated either "hearing" or "message" contributes to the challenge of rightly interpreting this passage. But the main reason we tend to misinterpret this scripture has to do with the way we understand this verse in the King James Version which says, *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* Even if the KJV translation is correct (*word of God* instead of *word of Christ*) the context points to the preaching of the gospel as the "word of God." What else did the apostles mean in Acts 6:4 when they said, "*We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word?*" Were they talking about studying the Bible? Preparing sermons? Obviously not. They were talking about preaching the gospel. And here in Romans 10, so is Paul.

If someone is going to have faith in Christ, they need to hear the word of God—the gospel of Jesus Christ. My suggestion to Christians who want their faith increased is to exercise it. And this comes not just by hearing the word—but doing it.

Romans 11:1-24

June 29

Do Not Be Arrogant, but Be Afraid

Felix...sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave." -Acts 24:24-25

There are various ways to talk to someone about the gospel. Each situation is different and will call for a unique approach. But as Paul spoke to Governor Felix about faith in Christ, he discoursed on three subjects: *Righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.* What were these topics, why were they important for Paul to cover when explaining the gospel, and what might we learn from Paul's precedent?

Felix was the governor of Judea and, as such, *was well acquainted with the Way* (v22). He was hearing the case the Jews were bringing against Paul. The proceedings had been adjourned, but while Paul was still in custody he spoke to the governor about our three topics:

Righteousness: The one question that led me to Christ was, "Am I right with God." I wondered how I could actually be righteous. Paul spoke to Felix about what it meant to be righteous. It was a prevalent subject in his letters (he uses a form of the term 34 times in Romans alone). Paul might have said to Felix something like, "*No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law...But now righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ*" (Ro 3:20-22).

Self-control: As in the case with "righteousness," the subject has two aspects: The reality that we lack it and the question of how to obtain it. Perhaps Paul sensed that this was a bothersome issue for Felix. The opposite of self-control is self-indulgence. For those who long to be free from the bondage to self, the gospel is great news.

The Judgment to Come: Can there be any more important subject than the judgment to come? The skeptical need to be convicted and the fearful need to be comforted with the news that Jesus saves. Perhaps this is the subject that caused Felix to be afraid and say "*That's enough for now.*"

Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes, "*He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment*" (Jn 16:8). As Paul spoke to Felix, he spoke of these very things. No doubt then, these are the subjects we should keep in mind when we speak to others about the state of their souls.

Acts 24:27-25:22

June 6

To Caesar You Will Go!

My suggestion to Christians who want their faith increased is to exercise it

The skeptical need to be convicted and the fearful need to be comforted with the news that Jesus saves

Paul answered...if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar! After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!" -Acts 25:10-12

20 percent of the book of Acts is given over to the story of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and the court cases that followed. Before Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he was forewarned that he would be taken captive by the Jews and turned over to the Romans (see Acts 21:11). Both the Jews and the Romans acted consistently throughout Paul's detention. The Jews sought to kill him and the Romans didn't know what to do with him. Paul had become the focus of a chess game where to the Romans he was a political pawn and to the Jews he was a renegade knight.

I don't know if it bothered Paul that he was unduly arrested and for more than two years he sat in prison without a proper charge laid against him. I would think that it did. As he was in prison, might it have crossed his mind that he should have heeded the disciples at Tyre who *through the Spirit urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem* (Ac 21:4)? But to help him deal with this blatant injustice, Paul would have remembered that near the beginning of all this, the Lord came to him and said, *"Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome"* (Ac 23:11).

So, Paul was headed to Rome, and I guess it didn't matter how he would get there—although I'm sure that Paul was questioning how long it was going to take. Two years after Governor Felix had promised that he would decide Paul's case, Paul was still in prison, partly because Felix was waiting for a bribe. So, like Joseph who had been unjustly jailed in Egypt, Paul had to wait and believe that God's purposes would be fulfilled at the proper time. When Festus became Governor and the case was reopened, Paul appealed to Caesar. *"You have appealed to Caesar."* Festus declared. *"To Caesar you will go!"* The fact was, Paul *could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar* (Ac 26:32). But he knew he was moving in the will of God by doing so and would have been playing into the hands of the Jews who wanted to kill him if he hadn't appealed to Caesar.

Things that happen to us that seem unfair or illogical are sometimes God's way of fulfilling his purposes. Once again we see that the unconventional yet prolific wisdom of the Holy Spirit at work. Paul was destined for Rome (ala Mark 13:9) and it was the Lord's business how he would get him there.

Acts 25:23-26:32

June 7

I Pray That You May Become What I am

For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. -Romans 10:2

Zeal without knowledge is a dangerous thing. To give your energy, money and even your life to something that is not grounded in reality is a haphazard exercise that can lead to destruction. Kamikaze pilots, jihad warriors and the cult faithful give clear and painful testimony to this truth.

In Romans 10:2, Paul is speaking of his own countrymen, the Jews. These are the people with whom he could relate, not only by ancestry but by action—as one who zealously, yet ignorantly, persecuted the church of God. Paul was a man who knew what it meant to have zeal without knowledge.

Paul's words reflect what Jesus taught in John 16:2-3 when he said to his disciples, *"A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me."* These are people who have zeal, *but their zeal is not based on knowledge.*

Whereas zeal without knowledge is cultish, knowledge without zeal is impotence

Zeal that is not based on knowledge can be defined in the popular vernacular as "cultish." After all, isn't that an earmark of the cults—zeal without knowledge? That they have zeal cannot be denied; but what about those who have knowledge but no zeal? Whereas zeal without knowledge is cultish, knowledge without zeal is impotence. Far too many Christians act as though zeal is a bad thing. It's not. You may have the seed but where is the power to give life if the seed remains unplanted? Or to use another analogy, your gun barrel may be straight but what good is it if there is no fire power?

D.L. Moody had an interesting outlook on the subject. He said, "If I had to choose between zeal without knowledge or knowledge without zeal, I would choose zeal without knowledge." It could be that he was reacting to the blight of passionless Christianity that seems to constantly affect the church. Or it could be that he was so full of *spiritual fervor* that to be without it seemed unthinkable. Whatever the reason, from Moody's perspective, zeal was something that the Christian could not do without. That's why Paul said, *"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord"* (Ro 12:11).

Zeal can lead to knowledge and knowledge can lead to zeal. If Satan can rob you of just one, his job is done. If we are going to be effective in the kingdom, we need both.

Romans 10:14-21

June 28

Faith Comes from Hearing the Message

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. -Romans 9:17-18

When I was in the Lord for just a few months, I grappled with, what seemed to me, the injustice of God hardening Pharaoh's heart (see Exodus 7-9). For a number of consecutive days I said to the Lord, "I don't think it was fair that you hardened Pharaoh's heart. How could Pharaoh be blamed for resisting your will?" Later, not necessarily looking for the answer to this question, I happened to come across Romans 9:15-18: "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*" *It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.* Through this, I heard the Spirit say, "What's it to you if God wants to harden Pharaoh's heart." The fear of the Lord came upon me and I just said, "Ok."

"Because I said so" is typically not the best answer for a parent to give to their questioning children. But the lesson that I learned early in my walk with God, and the point that Paul is making, is that God is Sovereign and his choices are above reproach. *Who are you, O man to talk back to God?* (v20). Does not the potter have the right to do what he wants with the clay? Part of the fear of God is to respect and accept his sovereignty in the affairs of his creation. The trend that I have seen in the church and society, however, is to view all questions from a point of self-understanding and self-interest. If something doesn't fit with my understanding and my interest, I will reject it. We seem to have little consideration for the possibility that our understanding is finite and our interests are selfish. To take the position that God's ways are higher than our ways and to submit to those ways, even if they don't fit with our understanding or interests, is not necessarily easy, but it is necessarily right.

To take such a position does not mean that I don't search for answers or give mindless and gutless resignation to injustice. But *God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.* And if you have a problem with that, you can take it up with him.

God is Sovereign and his choices are above reproach

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." Acts 26:28-29

Can you look at the people around you and say with conviction, "I pray to God that you would become what I am?" Can you speak from your heart to your family and friends who don't know Christ and say, "I wish you could be just like me?" Do you have the kind of experience with the Lord that allows you to assert without hesitation that you wish people could have that same experience? Not that you would want anyone to take on your preferences, opinions or personality, but that you, like Paul the apostle, would have a deep conviction that people need what you have—a life changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Notice Paul's sense of longing as he tries to persuade King Agrippa, Governor Festus and all assembled in the court of Caesarea to believe in Jesus. He speaks of his upbringing as a Jew and his role in persecuting the church. He tells of his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road and his obedience to the vision he received from heaven. He testifies about the resurrection of the Christ. When Festus interrupts and accuses him of going mad, Paul insists that he is being reasonable and appeals to Agrippa saying, "*Do you believe the prophets? I know you do.*" Put on the spot, Agrippa replies, "*Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?*" Paul earnestly appeals to the king and everyone gathered, "*Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.*"

In and of itself, Paul's confidence is a compelling testimony. He is persuaded that what he's got, they need. If only they could all become like him. His conviction borders on arrogance, as some would see it. But how can someone be arrogant after sitting two years in a Roman prison? A person might be expected to become bitter, but Paul is neither bitter nor arrogant. He sincerely wishes that they could be like him—except for the Roman chains that bound him. And despite his chains, if Paul had a choice, he would not have traded places with anyone in the courtroom that day. After all, he was probably the only one there who was truly free.

"Become what I am" is Paul's plea. Is it yours? Could you say with certainty that others would be better off if they could be what you are?

Could you say with certainty that others would be better off if they could be what you are?

On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land..."For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense...Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." -Acts 27:27, 34-35

Certain numbers have symbolic significance in the Bible. Fourteen is the number of deliverance and emancipation.

It may seem that there is nothing particularly significant about the fact that it took fourteen days before those onboard the ship that was transporting Paul to Rome were finally delivered from the fury of a storm of hurricane force. But if you do a study on the number fourteen in the Bible, you will find a special association with that number to God's deliverance. It was fourteen years before Jacob was free from his obligation to Laban, working for the hands of Leah and Rachel (Gen 29:27; 31:41). It was on the fourteenth day of the month that the Israelites were delivered out of Egypt (Ex 12:6; Nu 28:16) and it could very well have been that they had been in Egypt for fourteen generations. If it were suspected that you were leprous you had to remain in isolation for fourteen days, after which you could go free if the suspicion proved negative (see Leviticus 13). It is on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar that the Jews celebrate their deliverance from genocide during the time of Esther (see Esther 9:19). Matthew 1:17 says, *Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ*, signifying the completion of three different eras leading to the coming of the day of salvation in Christ. And guess how many years it was from the time that Joseph was sold into slavery until the time he was released from prison and given charge of the land of Egypt. Need I say?

Fourteen generations is a very long time. Fourteen years is not exactly a flash in the pan. And fourteen days can be a long time too, especially when you are in a torrent on the open sea. Just about any amount of time can seem long when you are waiting for deliverance. But God has a plan and, uncannily, his deliverance is often associated with the number fourteen. So, if you need deliverance, stick it out and look for the number fourteen as a sign of new freedom.

By the way, did you know the Emancipation Proclamation led to the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution?

Fourteen is the number of deliverance and emancipation

It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children...it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. -Romans 9:6-8

There is a beautiful truth in the Scriptures that those of us with non-Jewish lineage should hold especially dear. It is a truth that we Gentile Christians mostly take for granted. The truth of which I speak is the certainty that we who were once excluded from citizenship in Israel are now fully included because of Christ. We have become part of the Israel of God on the basis of God's new covenant promised to the Jews in Jeremiah 31.

This new covenant has become God's perfected way for establishing the true Israel. And many of us Gentiles who were once far off have been brought near. The downside to this is that the natural Jews who have rejected their own Messiah have turned away from the purposes of God and are disqualifying themselves from spiritual Israel.

Those in Christ are Israel

Romans 9:6 is teaching us that despite the rejection of the Messiah by the majority of the Jews, God's word has not failed. The natural descendants of Abraham rejected God's Son but the children of the promise are the children of faith. It is those with faith that have been reckoned as Abraham's offspring (see Galatians 3:7). It is the children of the promise (v8), not the natural descendants, who are true Israel. That is what Paul means when he says, *"Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children."*

God's word has not failed. It is fulfilled every time anyone, Jew or non-Jew, believes in the Messiah. Every promise of God to Israel is *yes and amen* in Jesus. Those in Christ are Israel. *A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code (Ro 2:28-29).*

Not all Israel is Israel. God can raise children of Abraham out of the rocks if he wants (see Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8). If natural Israel wants to truly be Israel they must come back to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has continued the uninterrupted flow of his purposes through the promised Messiah from Nazareth. And Paul's hope—and belief—is that someday they will.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. - Romans 8:29

The New Testament is replete with the truth that through faith in Christ, we have become children of God. For instance: *To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...* (Jn 1:12). *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!* (1 Jn 3:1). *Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father"* (Ga 4:6). If we are children of God and Jesus is the Son of God, does this mean that Jesus is our brother?

God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, to not only witness to our spirits that we are children of God, but to conform our very nature to the likeness of the perfect son, Jesus Christ. Paul says that we were *predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers*. The Greek word for "firstborn" is "prototokos" from which we get our word "prototype." Jesus is our prototype. He is the first of his kind with many to follow. Those who are born of God are being conformed to the very image of *the only begotten Son of God* (Jn 3:18 KJV). Jesus, the heir of God's inheritance, has gone before to make the way for us—not only to come into that same inheritance but to come into his likeness. It is in this sense that he is the prototype—*the firstborn among many brothers*.

Songwriter Michael Card has put it this way: "He became like us so that we would have a chance to be like him." Our ground for becoming siblings and co-heirs with Christ is not only that he became like us but that we are becoming like him. He did not compromise his divinity at the incarnation. He brought divinity into the place of humanity and gave us the opportunity to actually participate in his divine nature (see 2 Peter 1:4).

Jesus is the *firstborn among many brothers* and we are his siblings. Just as God has ordained Jesus as his beloved Son in whom he is well pleased, he has predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of his Son so we can take our place in God's family—knowing Jesus not only as Lord and Savior, but as brother.

Jesus is our prototype. He is the first of his kind with many to follow

There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island...His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. -Acts 28:7-8

The people of Malta had been very kind to Paul and the others who had been shipwrecked on their island. The chief official of the island had a father who *was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery* (according to the NIV Bible Commentary, in the 1800's Malta was infamous for a type of fever that was known to last four months). Paul, being a guest in the home, had an open door to minister healing to the father of the chief official. As he did, we see a simple three-step process that led to the man's healing. First Paul went to see him, then he prayed, and finally he laid his hands on the man to heal him.

When Luke says, *Paul went in to see him*, it may sound like a logistical detail and a mere formality in the story—after all, Paul has got to go in to see him if he is going to heal him (well, he doesn't—but you know what I mean). But to truly minister to someone you have to go in to "see" them. If you are a patient in the hospital, you know the difference between a physician who comes in who is truly interested in your welfare and one who is just taking care of business. The difference makes a difference.

In the course of Paul being with the sick man, he would have gained an idea what would have to take place for him to be healed. With that background, before he placed his hands on him, Paul prayed. Most versions of the Bible separate the actions of praying and the laying on of hands: *After prayer, [Paul] placed his hands on him and healed him*. It wasn't the prayer that healed him—it was the laying on of hands. The prayer preceded and paved the way for the healing to come. It could have been that Paul went into intercession; it could have been that he was seeking discernment and direction and it could have been that he was building faith. And when Paul laid his hands on the man, his words would not have been a prayer to God. At that point it would have been a command for healing.

We see a similar pattern when Tabitha was raised from the dead: *Peter sent them all out of the room. Then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up"* (Ac 9:40). And if you remember, it was after prayer that Lazarus was raised from the dead as well (see John 11:41-42). So, the next time you are praying for someone to be healed, instead of praying for their healing, try praying before their healing. You might get better results.

The prayer preceded and paved the way for the healing to come

“We want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.” -Acts 28:22

The true church will always find plenty of detractors. Just because someone speaks against your particular group does not mean that you are “footstep followers of Jesus.” But be assured that if you are truly walking in the light, not everyone is going to speak well of you. And the more that you are like the early church, the more you will find that *people everywhere* will be talking against you.

Paul was finally in Rome. As his first order of business, he called together the leaders of the Jews. Paul had obviously gained much favor with the Roman authorities (see Acts 27:42 – 28:10) and was allowed to receive guests while under guard. These Jews in Rome had heard about Christianity, but they hadn’t heard much about Paul—no unfavorable reports about him had come from Judea by letter or by word of mouth.

If you are truly walking in the light, not everyone is going to speak well of you

That may not be as surprising as it sounds because it wasn’t so much Jews from Judea who were causing trouble for Paul—thousands of them had actually gotten saved. It was, by far, Jews from the province of Asia who had opposed Paul most fiercely. So, as Paul had gathered the Jews to speak to them as a follower of Jesus, they said, *“We want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.”*

Jesus did not elicit a lukewarm reaction from any of his contemporaries. Some loved him. Some hated him. But no one could ignore him. When you can’t be ignored, people are going to have to decide what they think of you. They will like you or dislike you. They are going to speak either favorably or unfavorably about you. I remember a number of years ago—when John Wimber was still alive—everybody had an opinion about the Vineyard movement, which Wimber led. In the church and in both the secular and Christian media, people were talking against the Vineyard. Others spoke in favor of what they believed God was doing in and through the movement. Today however, you don’t hear much about the Vineyard. Whether that’s a good thing or not, I’m not sure.

Jesus said, *“Woe to you when all men speak well of you”* (Lk 6:26) for that is how the false prophets were treated. I think you would have to take a good long look at yourself if no one spoke well of you but, all in all, it is not a bad thing if it seems that *people everywhere are talking against* you. It’s actually a mark of the New Testament church.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed... the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. -Romans 8:19, 21

Paul is reflecting here on the future glory that will come at the end of the age as we know it. The entire creation will be redeemed from its fallen state. Paul says that all of creation is waiting for this day. We who have been born again to spiritual redemption also long for the time when we will put off our own mortality to be forever clothed with immortality. All of *creation waits in eager expectation* for this final adoption and revelation of the children of God that will mark the passing away of the old order of sin and the establishing of a new heaven and new earth in keeping with his promise. This day of the Lord will come in a time in the future that Father God has set by his own authority.

Can God’s kingdom come and his will be done on earth in such a way that the longing of creation is given a foretaste of the perfection to come?

This, of course, has not happened yet. In what sense, if any, can the longing of the natural order be fulfilled by a supernatural revelation of the children of God in this present age? Can God’s kingdom come and his will be done on earth in such a way that the longing of creation is given a foretaste of the perfection to come? Can the children of God be revealed even now?

I suspect that the creation sat up and took notice every time Jesus did a miracle. If the created order *waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed*, how did it respond at the revelation of the Son of God? What reverberations took place in the natural order when he walked on water, and fed the five thousand, and healed the blind, and raised the dead, and stilled the storm? Creation was, in fact, receiving the testimony that the not yet was being displayed in the here and now. All who had a yearning for the promise of redemption from decay and death watched in wonder when Jesus appeared on the earth. And we who carry in our mortal bodies the life of Jesus can make creation sit up and take notice as well.

The created order is waiting for the ultimate revelation of the sons of God and final liberation from its bondage to decay. And all over the world, in hospital wards, war-torn countries, sin-laden city streets and broken-hearts, God’s creation is eagerly expecting and longing for the children of God to be revealed in the here and now so that the future hope might have substance in present glory.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. -Romans 8:12

Why is it that we at times live as if we had some kind of obligation to the sin nature? Why do we often act as if we were required to obey the impulses of the flesh and of necessity enter into sin? Too many Christians live as if their lives are mortgaged to sin. The statements that I have heard from Christians like, “I sin everyday” and, “I’m just a sinner saved by grace” make it seem like their capitulation to the carnal nature is obligatory.

When we are obliged to someone or something it means that we owe them a debt. The Greek word Paul uses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is the same word used in Matthew 6:12 when Jesus instructed us to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” What debt could we possibly owe to our flesh? We have no debt to the sin nature. We have no debt to sin. Our debt is to the one who paid the price that we would be free from sin.

To concede to a life of sin after Jesus has paid the price to free us is exactly like paying daily visits to your old cell block

To concede to a life of sin after Jesus has paid the price to free us is exactly like paying daily visits to your old cell block after you have been given a pardon for your crime. “Well, I’m just a criminal pardoned by grace and criminals belong in prison so I need to spend time there every day cause, well, that’s just who I am. I’m obligated to spend at least part of my day there because of my criminal nature.”

Our obligation is not to the sin nature. Why would we live as if it were? Why would we suppose that we have any obligation to that which can only bring death? How could we believe that the price that Jesus Christ paid for our freedom was insufficient to make us free? How could we think that our Father would relegate us to incomplete abiding in him?

When we acquiesce to sin, we are in a sense saying that we have some kind of obligation to it—that we are bound to sin. We give in without a fight. Why? Because we are so used to it? Because our experience knows no other frame of reference? Because our teachers have led us in this direction?

Whatever the reason, Paul speaks a different word. Our obligation is not to live according to the sin nature. It is to live according to the Spirit in constant view of the cross.

Romans 8:18-27

June 23

The Creation Waits in Eager Expectation

"I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." -Romans 1:10-12

Paul, the great apostle to the Gentile world, had not yet made it to Rome. But the message of the gospel had arrived and the church of God had already been established. In fact, Paul said that their faith was being reported all over the world (v8). And even though Paul normally preferred to go places that had not yet heard the good news of salvation in Christ, God had given him a commission to go to Rome (see Acts 23:11). That Paul wanted to come to Rome is clear: “I long to see you” (v11); “I pray that now at last...the way may be opened ...” (v10); “I planned many times to come to you” (v13). The reasons he wanted to come? There were two.

This kind of “mutual encouragement” is probably not going to happen between the invocation and the benediction

The first reason, which was understandable when you think about Paul's ministry, was so that he might have a *harvest* among them, just like he did at other places where he preached the gospel and many Gentiles were brought into the Kingdom (v13). He felt both an obligation (v14) and an eagerness (v15) to reach people with God's appointed message.

Whereas the first reason had to do with enlarging the church, the second had to do with strengthening it. “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.” It seems this longing to strengthen the church was just as strong a desire for Paul as was enlarging it. And Paul was interested in more than just the church being strengthened; he was looking for something to build his own faith as well. How was all this to be done? By mutual encouragement; by getting together and exercising whatever spiritual gifts were embodied in the church so that an exchange of spiritual blessings could take place. Paul knew that if he could come and be with the saints in the church at Rome, he could impart to them some spiritual gift—say, prophecy, or teaching, or miracles—and they too could exercise whatever gifts they had received in the Lord so that there could be mutual encouragement. And that is the way is supposed to work in the church.

Be aware that this kind of “mutual encouragement” is probably not going to happen between the invocation and the benediction. But if you are like Paul and long to sharpen and be sharpened, you will find that the Lord will provide those with whom you can be mutually encouraged in the faith.

Romans 1:18-32

June 12

They Exchanged the Truth of God for a Lie

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie... -Romans 1:24-25

As I write this, the Ontario Court of Appeal has just upheld a lower court ruling that the prohibition of same sex marriages violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and is thus unconstitutional. Now, for the first time in Canada, a man can marry another man. We have exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

A good portion of Paul's letter to the Romans is stinging reproach of such conduct. Why, at the beginning of his letter, he so abruptly goes into detail about the wrath of God concerning this kind of behavior is intriguing. Certainly, God is trying to tell us something. And when you read it, there is no way you can deny its application to prevalent issues in today's society—especially regarding persons of the same gender having sex with each other. There are those who *suppress the truth by their wickedness* (v18) and who *are without excuse because what may be known about God is plain* (vs20, 19). There are those who *claimed to be wise but they became fools* (v22). There are those who *exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones...and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion* (vs 26, 27). Tell me that you can picture a man having sex with another man and label it as beautiful and natural. If you can, you have exchanged the truth for a lie.

Today, Paul would be called homophobic—which is ridiculous. He didn't fear homosexuality. He feared God. It is currently vogue to maintain that truth is something that the individual can decide. But to not submit to the inward witness of God's truth in lieu of whatever suppositions that we prefer to believe is to exchange the truth of God for a lie. In the end, no one can say "I didn't know," because, in the end, it will be seen that whatever lie was ultimately believed and accepted came in exchange for the very truth of God that originally resided within.

The ultimate consequence of this exchange is not pretty. Those who do not *think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God* (v28) for the sake of justifying idolatrous, greedy and sexually perverted lifestyles will be given over to a darkened heart and a depraved mind (vs 21, 28). From there, hope of being raised out of the cesspool of a degraded life is as distant as the faded memory of the truth of God that was discarded along the way.

Romans 2:1-16

June 13

God's Kindness Leads You toward Repentance

Tell me that you can picture a man having sex with another man and label it as beautiful and natural

You also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God...But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. -Romans 7:4, 6

I once heard a story of a woman who had a severely abusive and controlling husband. For years she had hoped to get out of the relationship but feared for her life if she separated from him. He was a wealthy man and owned a vacation home on Cape Cod. Some new neighbors invited them to go sailing one evening, and he made her come, though she was deathly afraid of the ocean. Night had fallen and a storm was blowing in. When the sea became turbulent and the wind and waves rocked the boat, the woman saw her opportunity as they were nearing the shore. Despite her fear, she purposely fell overboard and made it to shore under the cover of night. When the only thing the coast guard could find was her discarded life vest, everyone, including her husband, considered her to be dead. She escaped to a faraway town where she took on a new identity and found a new man.

In a very real way, this illustrates what Paul speaks of in Romans 7. Once bound by the abject curse of the law, we had no way to be free from its condemnation and the abusiveness of sin. But, "*The law has authority over a man only as long as he lives*" (v1). It sounds kind of strange, but the way we come out from under the domination of the law is to die to it. If you have joined yourself to Christ, you are said to have "died with him." His death became your death and his life becomes your life. *You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God* (Co 3:3). The things that used to have hold on you, no longer do. This includes the law, which is the power of sin (see 1 Corinthians 15:56). This is why Paul says, "*You also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another...by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law.*" We were once bound to a hard taskmaster, but because we died, we now belong to Christ and are under his authority. So we count ourselves dead to sin—and the law, and alive to Christ.

Would you rather be bound to the law or belong to Jesus? If you find that you can no longer live under the cruel yoke of sin and the law, there is a way out. Declare yourself dead, take a new identity and join yourself to Christ.

Romans 8:1-17

June 22

We Have an Obligation

The way we come out from under the domination of the law is to die to it

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey--whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? -Romans 6:16

“You’re gonna have to serve somebody” wrote Bob Dylan, and he was right. “It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Because of the nature of fallen humanity, it becomes a preposterous notion for anyone to claim freedom apart from the exquisite paradox of slavery to Christ. If someone without Christ claims “I am a slave to no one,” don’t believe it. Their unredeemed carnal nature has a hold on them as sure as they are breathing, and their perceived freedom is probably a self-centered accommodation to the flesh that has ensnared their will. They may have convinced themselves that they are free, but their delusion removes them a continent from the frontiers of true freedom.

Paul was addressing the notion that it was ok for the Christian to sin, having been justified by grace and no longer under the law. “*By no means,*” he says. “*Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey--whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?*”

Jesus said, “*Anyone who sins is a slave to sin*” (Jn 8:34). How can anyone who sins say that they are not a slave to it? Those who sin do so not only because of willful choice but because they lack the power to do otherwise. The unregenerate person who wants to sin, does. And even the one who does not want to, does as well. Why? Because in our unredeemed nature, we are all slaves to sin. “*But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness*” (vs 17-18).

So, take your pick. You can be a slave to sin which leads to death or to obedience which leads to righteousness. You can go your own way, offering yourself *to impurity and ever-increasing wickedness* (v19), or you can respond to the gospel and take the yoke of Jesus and offer yourself as a slave to righteousness leading to holiness. Righteousness leading to holiness: That is the ultimate freedom. And you’ll never get there without becoming a slave—to the obedience of Christ.

Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? - Romans 2:4

What motivates and leads us to repentance? What is the thing that will make us most sorry for our sins and want to change? Is it the fear of punishment and of God’s righteous anger? Is it standing on the precipice of calamity? Is it our conscience? Is it the moral fiber developed in us by those who taught us righteousness by precept and example? As compelling as these things ought to be to lead us toward repentance, there is one thing that, ironically, may outdo everything else in bringing us to contriteness before God: His kindness.

After Paul speaks so strongly about God’s wrath *against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness* (Ro 1:18ff) he exhorts us not to take on God’s role as judge. If we pass judgment on the sin of others, we *show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads toward repentance.*

It changes us when we have a revelation of God’s kindness in the midst of our rebellion toward him. Knowing that we deserve rejection for the wrong that we are doing and yet finding that the kindness of the Father is still being extended makes us feel bad in a good kind of way. His love endures when ours does not. He still “does us good” when we “do him wrong.”

When I was a boy, I stole some money from my Mom’s purse. When she confronted me about the missing money, she somehow did it with such love that I felt terrible for having taken it. I didn’t so much fear the punishment (which I did receive) as I regretted having done wrong to the one who continued to show me such love. I was truly repentant ala Jean Valjean who repented in response to the kindness of a priest in Victor Hugo’s powerful novel, “Les Miserables.”

The Prodigal Son was led to repentance knowing that he could count on the kindness of his father. It wasn’t the sternness of the father as much as his kindness that led the son to repent and come home. Knowing God’s kindness gives us the assurance that he will accept our repentance and leads us to the belief that the patience he has will foster within us the ability to change.

When we deserve punishment and we receive mercy instead it leads us into true repentance. And that’s the story and the power of the gospel.

It becomes a preposterous notion for anyone to claim freedom apart from the exquisite paradox of slavery to Christ

When we deserve punishment and we receive mercy instead it leads us into true repentance

You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?...You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." -Romans 2:21-24

Sometimes the hardest person to teach is yourself. It is easy to tell others what is right; it is harder to abide by it yourself. There is an old adage that says, “*Physician, heal thyself*” (Lk 4:23). If you teach or call yourself a teacher you should ask, “Have I taught myself the lessons that I am wanting others to learn?”

In this passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans, he is chiding those who might be considering themselves a *guide for the blind, a light for those in the dark, an instructor of the foolish and a teacher of infants* (vs19, 20). He was raising questions about the authenticity of who they might claim to be. “*You who preach against stealing, do you steal?...You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?*” Were they teaching others, but not teaching themselves? Were they saying one thing, but doing another?

If you really want to be a teacher then you must teach by example and not just precept. The best teachers are the ones who have internalized the truth of what they teach and live it accordingly. To practice what you preach does not change the essence of truth—it just makes it a whole lot clearer for others to see it.

The truth is the truth even if it is not being modeled by the one who teaches it, but the impact of that truth is severely compromised when presented by someone who does not live it. The confidence of a teacher is weakened when they are condemned by their own hearts as they attempt to teach the very truth that they themselves are not practicing. And, even if the hearers are not expressly aware that the one who is teaching is not living it, more than likely, something in their spirits will know and discern a hollow ring. Worse yet, when the hearers are expressly aware of hypocrisy, they reject the message and possibly blaspheme the name of God (v.24)—not because the food is bad but because the container is unattractive.

This doesn’t mean that if you are not perfect you should be silent. It just means that your teaching shouldn’t be a sham. God will honor your teaching more if the model fits the message. So before we teach others, we should learn to teach ourselves.

Romans 3:1-18

June 15

Entrusted with the Very Words of God

When the hearers are aware of hypocrisy, they reject the message not because the food is bad but because the container is unattractive

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more... -Romans 5:19-20

While imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp of Ravensbruck, Germany, Betsy ten Boom would tell her sister Corrie the words that would be made famous through the book and movie, “The Hiding Place”: “No pit is so deep that God is not deeper still.” Nothing produced by evil is beyond redemption. In fact, the greater the evil, the greater the supply of the goodness of God to redeem it. If sin increases, grace will be offered all the more.

In the economy of fallen humanity, there was a debt owed that no mortal could pay. Our first parents sinned, opening the floodgates of unabated corruption and death into the place they had once known as continual paradise. Consequently, *through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners*. The law was given to show that sin was increasing and our position untenable. But then, one righteous act by the only perfectly righteous human being who ever lived solved it all and turned those who were formerly condemned as sinners into persons now declared righteous.

All this because God hates sin and, without exception, wants to redeem it. If allowed, he will bring good out of every situation—even a death camp. If sin increases, grace increases. If things are going the wrong way, God can turn it around. If you are in a desperate situation, look for his strength to be perfected in your weakness. If things are on a moral decline, watch and pray. God takes delight in bringing the good from the bad. The worse a situation gets, the greater the grace available to redeem it.

The finest stories of grace are found in the places most devoid of hope: Betsy ten Boom in Ravensbruck; Mother Teresa in Calcutta; Paul and Silas in Philippi. Jesus Christ on Golgotha.

Are you in a place where it seems like sin is increasing? Darkness is overwhelming? Pain is unbearable? Hope is lost? Lift up your head because your redemption is drawing near with grace that will certainly envelop both you and the situation. Where sin increases, grace increases all the more.

Romans 6

June 20

You Are Slaves to the One You Obey

The finest stories of grace are found in the places most devoid of hope

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. -Romans 5:1-2

The hope of the glory of God is the expectation of experiencing that which comprises the glory of the Almighty: The majesty, power and splendor of his person, presence and dwelling. This hope has its ultimate expectation in the next life but also holds out much anticipation in this life.

As fallen creatures, we have no right to share in the hope of the glory of God, but as persons in his image we have been created with the desire. Moses longed to see the glory of God; as did David; as did the disciples of Jesus. We were created not only to see the glory of God with our eyes but to have our innermost being changed by it. We long to not only have his glory revealed to us, but also revealed in us (see Romans 8:18).

As fallen creatures, we have no right to share in the hope of the glory of God, but as persons in his image we have been created with the desire.

We have the assurance that one day we will come face to face with the indescribable glory of God in the place of his eternal dwelling. And, as partakers of the divine nature, God shows us his glory here and now as we live according to his Spirit in the present reality of the kingdom of God. This is not only cause for rejoicing but for unreserved worship.

A pastor friend of mine recently attended a denominational leadership conference where the speaker bemoaned the current emphasis in the church on expressive worship. The speaker described it as “emotional escapism.” He was promoting a more cerebral approach where worship should be reflection on good theology rather than seeking an emotional experience. The point he may be missing is that worshipers are supposed to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. When we get a revelation of the glory that lies ahead while getting a foretaste of that glory in the here and now, the response should really be...well...to rejoice. Some may rejoice more reservedly than others but to “escape” into the wonder of the glory of God in worship is suitable behavior considering the greatness of that glory. And should we not rejoice in hopeful anticipation of the ultimate “escape” from this dark world into the presence of eternal heavenly glory?

The glory to be revealed will be so marvelous that we can rejoice in our sufferings (see v3) because our suffering produces an even greater hope concerning the glory of God to be revealed. So go ahead—rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

Romans 5:12-21

June 19

Where Sin Increased, Grace Increased All the More

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew...? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. -Romans 3:1-2

Throughout Paul’s letter to the Romans, he speaks about the Jews and their role in the economy of God. He asks what advantage there is in being a Jew and answers, “*Much in every way.*” And what does he say is the first advantage? *They have been entrusted with the very words of God.*

The very words of God: How important would it be to know those words? And how significant a thing would it be if those words were entrusted to your care? It is one thing for God to speak; it is another for him to entrust his oracles to a people to keep for posterity. The Jews, and now the church, have been given custody of the very words of God. And that is no small thing.

The Jews, and now the church, have been given custody of the very words of God

People need to hear what God is saying. If we can know what God is saying, then we can know truth because God, of necessity, is the source of all truth. Without God there is no ground of truth; all becomes relative and each one can do what is right in his or her own eyes. If any religion can lay legitimate claim to having the very words of God then they can lay that same claim to possessing the truth that can set people free. They must therefore be adamant about communicating that truth—the very words of God—to the people who have yet to hear and understand. For there can be nothing more life-giving than to hear and understand *the very words of God.*

If what Paul says is true about the Jews receiving the very words of God, what does this say about the nature of the Bible? Does the Bible contain the very words of God? Yes. In John 10:35, Jesus equates the Scripture (the Hebrew Bible, if you will) with the word of God and says, “*The Scripture cannot be broken.*” Jesus affirms that the Jews had indeed received the very words of God and, as such, they could not be broken.

No, they cannot be broken, and yes, they have been providentially preserved through the millennia. But how were they cared for by the Jews? And how are they being cared for by the church? Are we doing justice to the very words of God by, first of all, submitting to them and, secondly, by getting the word out to others?

You have been entrusted with the very words of God. That may be the most noble stewardship you will ever receive. What will you do with them?

Romans 3:19-31

June 16

The Whole World Held Accountable to God

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. - Romans 3:19-20

Can you imagine any soul rising up on the great day of reckoning and arguing with God that his verdicts are unjust? No one will be excused from the final judgment by saying to the Almighty, "I didn't know you required anything of me." On that day, *every mouth will be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.*

There are two things that hold us accountable to God: His witness in the conscience and his witness in the law. The outward witness of the law of God written on tablets, scrolls and paper agrees with the inner witness written on our hearts. The righteous requirements of the law are first written on our hearts with our consciences bearing witness (see Romans 2:15). Added to this is then the written law of God that spells out more exactly and entirely his expectations, confirming what we already instinctively know. For instance, why do you know that stealing is wrong? Because of your conscience and the law. They both testify to the truth and have the power to convict if and when you steal. Your mind and your will may try to justify your action, but your conscience and the law still speak a different word and there is nothing you can say to change it.

Some argue that the conscience is a product of environment. Conscience will be shaped by environment but it is never produced by it. The conscience is placed by God in us with the instinctive knowledge that there is a Creator and we are accountable to him. Religion is the attempt to give tangible definition to this instinctive knowledge. But only God himself can define what he requires. He has done this, first through the conscience, then through the law and now most fully through the revelation of himself through his son. All other attempts to give definition to God are of human origin and imperfect.

The real purpose of the law is to make us fully aware of sin. So, before the day of judgment comes is let your conscience and the law silence your self-righteous justification and hold you accountable as a sinner. Then you can cry out to God for the righteousness that can only come through faith in Jesus Christ. When you do this you will receive a more perfect witness than even your conscience or the law: The Holy Spirit.

Romans 4

June 17

He Did Not Waver Through Unbelief

There are two things that hold us accountable to God: His witness in the conscience and his witness in the law.

He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." -Romans 4:20-22

In Romans 4, Brother Paul lifts up Abraham as the father of all who have faith, whether Jew or Gentile. The promise that God gave to Abraham was that, despite the fact that he and his wife Sarah were childless and were well past the childbearing years, he would have a son. God also promised that through this particular offspring, the number of Abraham's descendants would become like the stars in the sky. Though he had to wait twenty-five years, *he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God.*

Both the NASB and the NIV say that Abraham *did not waver through unbelief*. The KJV says that Abraham *staggered not...through unbelief*. This particular Greek word for "waver," "diakrino," is a combination of two very common words: "krino" which means "to judge," and "dia," a preposition which standing alone is usually translated "by" or "for," and in this case probably means "because of" or "for the sake of." So, in essence, the word "diakrino" means "because of judging" or "for the sake of judging." It is used nineteen times in the New Testament and is translated various ways including "doubt," "hesitate" and "weigh carefully."

Applying the meaning of this word to the example of Abraham, and extending the application to our own lives, we can learn something significant about what it means to have faith—without which it is impossible to please God and by which Abraham was credited righteousness. What Abraham was commended for was the fact that he did not stop to judge the word of God through unbelief. Yes, there was a time when he got ahead of God and took matters into his own hands, but still, he did not waver. He did not get derailed. He persevered. He was persuaded.

A person who stops to judge something is not persuaded. A person who continually analyzes a proposition is not convinced that it is real or good or possible. It is not always wrong to hesitate or to weigh carefully or to judge when mortals speak. But when the Living God has spoken, do not allow unbelief to cause you to waver. Like Abraham, be strengthened in your faith, give glory to God for what he has spoken and persevere until you have received what he has promised. Amen.

Romans 5:1-11

June 18

We Rejoice in the Hope of the Glory of God

A person who stops to judge something is not persuaded